

**Fw: Everyone agrees: The Animas is resource worth preserving**

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08/31/2011 01:32 PM

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FYI

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Change is the only constant.

- Heraclitus

----- Forwarded by Marcella Hutchinson/R8/USEPA/US on 08/31/2011 01:31 PM -----

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Promising cleanup efforts show progress is possible

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Promising cleanup efforts show progress is possible



Photo by: JERRY McBRIDE/Durango Herald

Decades of restoration efforts to heal the harm from mining in the Animas River are paying off with a strong recreational fishing industry. Several thousand rainbow trout fingerlings gobble up fish food dispersed by Michael Martinez with the Colorado Division Parks and Wildlife.

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Editors note: This is the final part of a four-part series about the state of the Animas River today.

By Dale Rodebaugh And Lynda Edwards

Herald Staff Writers

With so many competing interests dependent on the Animas River, any successful efforts to clean it up and preserve it are going to require a lot of compromise.

At some points, the complexity of the law, the depth of the bureaucracy and the passions of the opposing sides make reaching a consensus seem unattainably ambitious.

But glimmers of good-faith collaboration are giving those toiling in the trenches reason to hope.

One such glimmer is the River Protection Workgroup, a coalition formed in 2006 as a result of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act approved by Congress in 1968.

Meghan Maloney, a former river-issues coordinator at the San Juan Citizens Alliance, said the coalition has been a model of community participation.

“Everyone who wants to be is part of the process,” Maloney said.

Similarly, the decision whether to declare the area around the Animas River's headwaters a Superfund site because of leaking mine contamination has sparked controversy but also demonstrated each side's deep commitment and love for the waterway.

(Superfund refers to the pot of money created by Congress for major environmental cleanups using revenue from a tax on the chemical and petroleum industries.)

Meanwhile, some experimental efforts to restore the ecosystem of the San Juan Mountains around Silverton have produced some promising results.

### Wild and scenic

The Wild and Scenic Rivers legislation was created to protect – in free-flowing condition – rivers with outstanding natural, cultural and recreational values.

Congress or the Department of the Interior can designate a river or a portion of it as eligible for the label, and administration falls to a federal or state agency.

Activities curtailed by the designation could be development, off-road vehicle use and water projects.

In Southwest Colorado, the river-protection coalition is working to ensure that the management of six regional waterways serves everyone's best interests. Members include state and local water agencies, the state's two U.S. senators, environmental organizations, landowners, outdoors and recreational interests and residents.

Subgroups were formed to focus on Hermosa and Vallecito creeks and the San Juan, Piedra, Pine and Animas rivers. Vallecito Creek was incorporated in the Pine River study.

"We want to know what the community thinks," said Steve Fearn, a board member of the Southwestern Water Conservation District. "We're looking for ideas.

Fearn said people come to the work groups with divergent ideas and sometimes are "not talking to others."

"But discussion can build trust and understanding, although there are no guarantees," he said.

Dan Randolph, acting executive director of the San Juan Citizens Alliance and a River Protection Workgroup participant, said no binding decisions are made.

"The purpose of the group is to find out where there's agreement, where there's disagreement, where there's the possibility of agreement," Randolph said.

What comes out of the study sessions, Randolph said, is a report for use in future decision-

making. In the case of Hermosa Creek, the report is being used by U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet to draft legislation to protect the watershed.

Progress, perseverance

When addressing mining contamination in the upper Animas, everyone agrees on one thing: It needs to be cleaned up.

Disagreements arise on the question of how.

Some believe having the area declared a Superfund site would bring new resources to bear on the problem. But some residents, especially in the Silverton area, are deeply concerned about the economic impact such a label could have on the area, which relies heavily on tourism.

For this reason, a recent public meeting involving EPA officials in Silverton drew a large crowd that overflowed the conference room in the basement of a Silverton miners' hospital.

It remains to be seen how the EPA and the Animas River Stakeholders Group, a coalition formed in 1994 to tackle the problem, will decide to treat four abandoned mines in the Gladstone area north of Silverton that are leaking about 800 gallons a minutes of toxic metals into Cement Creek, a tributary to the Animas River.

But progress is being made, said Peter Butler, chairman of the Colorado Water Quality Control Commission and a member of the stakeholders group.

Returning the Animas to its pre-settlement state won't be easy, but remediation efforts since 1994 have brought down the annual average amount of dissolved zinc in Mineral Creek by 50 percent, Butler said.

A bulkhead installed in the Koehler Tunnel – now being regouted – reduced the amount of toxic metals escaping.

Piles of toxic mine waste were capped with topsoil and planted with native vegetation, he said. Ditches were dug to divert water around the sites.

Within two weeks, Steven Way, on-scene coordinator for the EPA's emergency response unit, will start a new project that involves cutting through the collapsed entrance of the leaking Red & Bonita mine.

“We need to get in there and examine the contaminated water flow before we can make an assessment of what is needed,” Way said.

The solutions could include a hydraulic plug to keep the flow in the mountain or pipes to take it to a water-treatment facility. But first, Way's team will need to do some dirty and

dangerous investigative work inside the mountain, work that he hopes to finish before mid-September.

Way sees in these efforts cause for optimism.

“The notion that Durango and Silverton residents should just accept that the Animas will be polluted is unacceptable,” Way said. “It’s an important river historically and environmentally. OK, Cement Creek is never going to be Gold Medal trout fishing. But I truly believe it is possible to stop the mine contamination or alleviate it enough to protect the Animas and make it cleaner.”

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Photo by: JERRY McBRIDE/Durango Herald

These rainbow trout fingerlings are raised at the Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife fish hatchery in Durango to stock the Animas River.

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